

A clever bistro looks after flocks of locals for three meals a day.

Maitre Karl is a relaxed, welcoming and delightful cafe and bistro that attracts friends, dogs, kids and sundry others from sunrise to not too long after sundown – the kitchen closes at the very North Shore time of 9pm on weekdays. All dark timbers, art deco lights and brass and timber ceiling fans, with a faux-worn floor making it feel like a postwar slice of Alsace, the corner eatery is immersed in a joyous sense of European hospitality.

I'm not sure whether it's the polite locals but noise levels are low, the exception being the Master himself, Karl, whose rich bass booms across the room. There's a touch of Rene from 'Allo 'Allo about Karl, although he's Bulgarian, most likely remembered for his CBD cafe, Konig, on King Street.

Karl's grin is contagious and his presence writ large, whether he's encouraging you to try wine he's just procured, such as the Wenzel blaufrankisch (\$39.50) from Austria, just checking everyone's contented, flirting or lobbing the odd cheeky comment.

The menu spans the solid, beer cafe end of European bistro, its classics far more complex than a first glance suggests. Wake up with French toast, excellent brioche, pastries or a baguette with a glass of French sparkling, then drop in for (50-50) coffee and (yum-yum) cake or (yes! yes!) handmade chocolates. For lunch it's a salad, quiche or a twice-baked smoked trout soufflé with tarragon sauce (\$18.50).

There's one simple and excellent reason to seek out Maitre Karl: tarte flambee (\$14.50-\$17.50). Put simply, it's the Alsatian pizza, using fromage blanc as its base, rather



than tomato. The rectangular slabs of thinly rolled, yeast-free pastry are cooked rapidly in searing heat on volcanic Italian stone, sparsely scattered with a few toppings, served on a wooden board and sliced at the table.

They are filling and best shared. Variants include the gratinee, a hangover cure with an artery-clogging hit of bacon and onion, drowned with gruyere (a "classic" omits the cheese); the provencal, echoing a pissaladiere; and the Strasbourgeoise, a winner with sliced German sausage, tart sauerkraut and onion.

The short dinner menu seems like a cliché, but delivers with aplomb. Six snails in a gutsy broth with garlic and parsley (\$12.50) are fine, but I'm hoping good Australian gastropods will replace the canned French items.

Duck rillettes (\$15.50), a pair of startlingly pinkish terrine-shaped slices alongside a bosc pear and cornichon salad with toasted brioche, lacks the rich stickiness I'd hoped for. It's one of the few things bought in, courtesy of Sydney charcuterie maker Romeo Baudouin (ex-Prime), but its texture feels too processed and lacks appeal.

Oven-roasted duck (\$25.50) is a cracker quacker. Half a twice-cooked bird, deboned and scented with thyme, meat remarkably succulent, glazed skin crisp, is piled over a mound of braised red cabbage flecked with apple and onion and bolstered by a splash of grenadine, then sprinkled with muscat grapes sautéed with cognac. Wow.

Steak, chips and salad translates well in any language, but here it's Sirloin Cafe de Paris

(\$27.50). On-the-bone rib-eye, topped with a melting disk of herb butter, tops a pile of skinny pommes frites beside well-dressed mesclun. It survives a request for medium-well cooking still moist and tender, although a splash of veal jus helps along the way.

Medium rare kangaroo loin, spiced with sichuan pepper, nuzzles sweet potato and pumpkin on a cassis (blackberry) jus (\$27.50) in an enjoyable cross-cultural exchange.

The real surprise, however, is the Hungarian chicken with spaetzle (\$22.50). Roasted in a paprika marinade, the supreme holds a rich stuffing of brioche, mushrooms and parsley atop the spaetzle sautéed with mixed mushies: champignons, shiitake and oyster. I'm a sucker for spaetzle (literally "Little Sparrow") and these doughy handmade German noodles don't disappoint.

Tarte flambee makes a triumphant return aux pommes (\$9.50). Thin as butterfly wings, slices of cinnamon-spiced apple fan around the plate-sized tart, sexed-up with a splash of fiery calvados. There's a dollop of vanilla bean ice-cream and a spoon of quark and ricotta, mixed with cinnamon, for tartness. Crepe suzette is just as well executed, the Grand Marnier sauce also has just enough marmalade tartness to prevent it from being cloying.

Maitre Karl is a clever bistro serving honest food at great prices, with a wonderful wine list of cheap Euro-treasures to wash it down (although there's not a lot from Alsace). It's everything you'd want in a great local – unless you happen to enjoy eating late.